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SUBJECT: ABYEI TENSIONS RISE WHILE COMPROMISE IS SOUGHT

REFERENCE: IIR 6 890 0142 08

¶1. (SBU) Summary: According to a Misseriya SPLM MP the threat of ethnic conflict in Sudan's Abyei region has subsided, but a key GoSS Minister paints a much darker picture. On February 18, Mohammed Gour dismissed self-proclaimed "governor" al-Ansari as a tool of the NISS with no significant following among Abyei Misseriya. A long-term solution cannot be imposed from the outside, but local Misseriya and Ngok Dinka can devise one if left to themselves. He said the Misseriya would never accept the Abyei Boundary Commission report and would fight if the final border is "unfair." However, on February 21 GoSS Presidential Affairs Minister Biong Deng called al-Ansari's activities "a clear provocation" by the NCP and said that the SPLA was prepared to seek "a military solution" if necessary. End Summary.

Abyei: Backing away from Conflict?

¶2. (SBU) On February 18, Econoff and AIDoff met with Mohammed Gour, an ethnic Misseriya and SPLM Member of Parliament from Abyei. Gour said he had returned from a visit to Abyei and had just come from briefing the SPLM Political Bureau on his findings and recommendations. Gour said that news reports seriously exaggerate the level of tension in Abyei between Misseriya and Ngok Dinka and that the threat of conflict is subsiding. He had urged the Political Bureau that SPLM take a moderate tone in public, while seeking to defuse the situation through negotiations with the NCP in Khartoum. In Abyei itself, Gour said that respected, moderate Misseriya elder Abdul Rahman had been given the role of emissary to the Ngok Dinka community, assuring them that the Misseriya do not seek conflict.

Causes of Tension

¶3. (U) Relations between the sedentary Ngok Dinka and the semi-nomadic Misseriya are long and complex. Misseriya discontent has been building for some time over, due to their belief that the strongly SPLM Ngok Dinka have been gradually cutting them out of participation in the Abyei-regional government. But Gour said that this most recent flare-up is the result of actions taken by the SPLM/SPLA in recent months, including burning grasslands used by Misseriya herdsman for grazing, demands by the SPLA that the herdsman pay a tax and disarm before driving their herds over the North-South border to graze in North Bahr al-Ghazal state, and the appointment of Edward Lino as SPLM administrator for Abyei. Lino's appointment alarmed the Misseriya because they have as yet no official of equal stature able to speak for them collectively and deal with Lino on an equal footing.

A "Governor" with No Local Support?

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¶4. (SBU) Gour dismissed Muhammed Umar al-Ansari, the self-proclaimed Misseriya "Governor of Abyei" and leader of the "Abyei Liberation Front" (ALF). Al-Ansari has claimed that the ALF can field thousands (the exact number varies widely from statement to statement) of Misseriya militia to fight the Ngok Dinka and the SPLA. He has called for the Misseriya to be granted a controlling 55% share in the Abyei regional government. He also has demanded that he himself be named head of development for the area north of Abyei town, i.e., the bulk of the Abyei region. In the past, al-Ansari has been accused of seeking to boost the Misseriya population of Abyei by settling Misseriya from outside.

¶5. (SBU) Gour asserted that, in fact, al-Ansari had little or no base of support among the Abyei Misseriya and that his ALF is largely a fiction. Rather, Gour said that al-Ansari is being used as an instrument of Khartoum's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) to promote unrest in the region. According to Gour, the NISS wants to raise up al-Ansari as the NCP's counterweight to the SPLM's Edward Lino. (Note: On February 20, AIDoff was told that pro-NCP Oulad Kamal Misseriya chieftain Babu Mohktar Nimer has given his support to al-Ansari. He learned from UN contacts that they have second-hand reports of SAF troop and armored movements in neighboring southern Khordofan. However, AIDoff was told by al-Ansari himself that the NCP and SPLM have agreed to defuse the crisis by establishing a joint Ngok Dinka/Misseriya administration for Abyei and would announce this within 48 hours. Post has not yet been able to confirm this with the SPLM, but various influential Ngok Dinka from both the NCP and SPLM that have been meeting with Lino on February 20 in Khartoum expressed doubt to AIDoff that a solution has been found. End Note.)

Salva Kiir's Dilemma

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¶6. (SBU) Embofffs pressed Gour on what the Misseriya would regard as an acceptable solution to the Abyei issue, noting that GOSS President Salva Kiir Mayardit is in a delicate situation. On the one hand, Kiir needs to take a strong position on the location of the Abyei border and the security of the Ngok Dinka, both to avoid giving the NCP the perception that it might be able to challenge other provisions of the CPA, and because Abyei is a highly emotional issue among his supporters in the South. Were he perceived to back down on Abyei, he could be accused of weakness by SPLM hardliners. On the other hand, Kiir might run the risk of losing the recent growing support for the SPLM among the Misseriya, if they perceived him to be acting against their interests. Additionally, Gour mentioned that the SPLM was working to gain the support of Darfurians, some of which (i.e. the Rizigat) have close relations with the Misseriya.

¶7. (SBU) Gour refused to be pinned down on what the Misseriya would regard as acceptable. He maintained that a long-term solution could not be imposed from Khartoum by the SPLM and the NCP. He stated only that if left to themselves, the Abyei Misseriya and the Ngok Dinka would be able to work out an amicable solution and live in peace. Gour said that such a solution would have to be local, and would be possible only if the NCP and SPLM refrained from meddling. When pressed on the contentious issue of the location of Abyei's northern border, Gour stated that it must be the "1956 boundary," the boundary determined by the Abyei Boundary Commission is not acceptable (his own party, the SPLM, officially favors the ABC Report). Gour said that the Misseriya would fight, if the boundary is "unfair."

SPLM: "A Severe Provocation"

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¶8. (SBU) In a meeting with ConGen Juba on February 21, a worried and distracted GoSS Presidential Affairs Minister Luka Biong Deng described al-Ansari's activities as "a severe provocation" that was engineered by the NCP. This is a continuation by the NCP and SAF of previous disruptive activities along the North-South boundary over

the past few months. Luka asserted that al-Ansari could marshal 1500 armed supporters. He said that the NCP is manipulating the Abyei situation to hijack the agenda of the scheduled February 21 meeting between President al-Bashir and First Vice President (and GoSS President) Kiir to resolve recent Abyei tensions. He went on to say that the GoSS is prepared for "a military solution" if it comes to that. He said that one SPLA division is a 30 minute march from Abyei town and a second force is an hour away.

Comment

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¶9. (SBU) Gour's eyewitness observations provide hope that the underlying situation is not as volatile as is being reported elsewhere. However, this is the first time Consulate Juba has heard Minister Biong Deng - a key SPLM player in the Abyei situation who is extremely close to President Kiir - place the possibility of a military solution on the table. This is a dramatic and worrisome development. The Abyei situation continues to evolve rapidly and Post will continue to monitor the situation closely. As often feared, Abyei could help keep or break the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

¶10. (SBU) For information on the agenda for the February 21 meeting in Khartoum on the Implementation of Abyei Protocol, see DLO Khartoum IIR 6 890 0142 08.

FERNANDEZ